

THE PERFECT VENISON STEAK



Less really is more when it comes to the perfect venison steak. Stick to salt, pepper, and perhaps some fresh garlic. This might be the one instance (beyond dating) where too much garlic might actually be a bad thing. And whatever you do, don't overcook it. Venison is incredibly lean and will dry out quickly. It's important to account for both the fat content and the thickness of the cuts of meat when grilling or smoking venison (see Tips for the Perfect Venison Steak on page 56 for detailed information on these factors).

1. Pull thawed steaks out of the refrigerator about 1¼ hours before cooking, and generously rub them with salt and pepper. The flavor of venison is rich and decadent on its own; it should not be overpowered by other seasonings.

2. Once seasoned, return steak to the freezer for about 2 or 3 hours.

For grilling

- 1.** Bring the grill up to 375°F. Use a grill brush to liberally oil the grill.
- 2.** For medium-rare, place the steaks on the hottest part of the grill for about 2 minutes per side or until the internal temperature reaches 130°F.
- 3.** Remove the steak from the grill and tent with foil. Let rest for about 5 minutes before serving.

For smoking

You'll read or hear about a lot of different preparation methods for smoking a steak. When it comes to beef steaks, many grill masters will suggest a dry brine to break down fats and tenderize the meat prior to smoking. Such rules don't apply to venison steaks, mostly due to the fact that there will be very little fat to break down. So, instead of tenderizing the steak, the salt will pull all the juices from the meat and leave you with the equivalent of a meaty hockey puck to smoke.

Smoking venison steaks is something of a science because getting a nice level of smoke is difficult for something that cooks so quickly. Try one of these two methods to ensure a tender, smoky venison steak:

- 1.** You can stick with my original suggestion for a simple preparation of salt, pepper, and a little garlic and then throw your steak in the freezer for 2 hours prior to smoking it. This will allow it more time in the smoker and ensure the smoke flavor has time to infuse the meat without drying it out. Bring the smoker up to high heat before putting your steak in to ensure the chips have started to smoke. Then, turn the temperature down to 160°F and allow the steak to smoke for 1 to 2 hours, or until internal temperature has reached your desired doneness. Refer to the chart on page 14 to help determine the ideal internal temperature for your cut of meat.
- 2.** The second method includes marinating the steak overnight and following the same smoker preparation as listed above. Smoke for 40 minutes to an hour, or until you've achieved your desired doneness. The marinade produces a juicy, flavorful steak, but the levels of smoke will be milder.

TIPS FOR THE PERFECT VENISON STEAK

Cooking venison, pronghorn, bear, and other game steaks is very different from cooking beef steaks. The fat content will be much lower and the protein levels higher. For instance, an elk steak will typically contain about a third less fat than the same cut of meat from a bovine. It's important to keep this in mind when cooking game meats so you don't end up with a tough, dry prized cut of meat.

There are a couple tricks to ensure you get a tender steak every time.

- 1.** The first method is so incredibly simple: don't overcook your meat! I prefer a tender, juicy, rare to medium-rare steak and consider anything with a hotter center to be a culinary atrocity. That said, if you can't stomach pink meat, consider suggestions 2 and 3.
- 2.** Season the steak, let sit overnight, and baste with oil as you cook.
- 3.** Soak the steak in marinade for up 3 days prior to cooking.

As most venison steaks tend to be cut quite thin, getting a nice sear or smoke without overcooking the meat can be quite tricky. A thin cut is fine and dandy if you plan on breading and frying your steaks and drowning them in gravy, but for a decadent, melt-in-your mouth grilled or smoked steak, a thicker cut is better. It gives you a little extra cooking time so you can produce a crispy sear or nice smoke level on the meat without destroying the texture. So, if you take your game to a meat processing center, request $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch to 1-inch steaks, and if you do it yourself, don't stick to the thin-cut standby.

But what about all those wimpy steaks that are already in the freezer? Don't worry, all is not lost. Take them out, let them thaw, season them, and return them to the freezer for 2 or 3 hours before throwing them on the grill. This will allot them a bit more time on the grill or smoker, giving you a nice sear or smoke level on the outside while maintaining a pink or red center.

COMPOUND BUTTER

Compound butters are a great way to gussy up a simple steak. Some of my favorite variations include adding fresh herbs like rosemary and thyme; garlic and cracked pepper; cheeses, especially creamy blue cheese or Brie; and Dijon mustard, with or without fruit or fruit-flavored syrups. I add 1 tablespoon of herbs and spices, but for cheeses, I usually use equal parts butter and cheese. • **Yield:** ¼ pound | **Prep time:** 5 minutes

herbs, spices, and seasoning elements, as desired

¼ pound butter at room temperature

1. Using a blender or food processor, mix your desired ingredients into the butter.
2. Once the butter and desired ingredients have been thoroughly blended, add them to a



pipng bag to pipe directly onto the steak, or use plastic wrap to shape the compound butter into a typical stick of butter to freeze. Pull from the freezer as needed and slice to don a steak.

LEMON BUTTER DIPPER

The delightful, aromatic blend of citrus and butter enrich the flavor of a well-cooked, juicy steak. The lemon brightens the dish with a tangy, refreshing bite that is balanced with the creamy butter.

• **Yield:** ¼ cup | **Prep time:** 5 minutes | **Cook time:** 8 to 10 minutes

1 tablespoon minced fresh garlic

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

¼ teaspoon turmeric, optional

¼ teaspoon finely chopped fresh rosemary

½ cup unsalted butter

1 tablespoon heavy whipping cream

sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste

1. Pulse garlic, lemon juice, turmeric, if using, rosemary, salt, and pepper in a food processor until they form a smooth paste.
2. Melt the butter over medium-high heat in a small saucepan.
3. Mix in the lemon-garlic paste and cream in with the butter and cook on low for another 2 minutes.
4. Return the mixture to the food processor and pulse.
5. To serve, place in a dish and serve as a dipping sauce for your favorite cut of steak or drizzle over the top.